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AUTHOR Hooker, Joyce
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ABSTRACT

The primary aim of the reading center at Brigham Young University (Utah) is to teach typical university students critical reading skills, not just to work with students needing remedial or basic help. The reading center also serves as a resource for teachers in all disciplines who want help in recognizing and evaluating good reading, or who want suggestions about improving the literacy skills necessary to their discipline. In order to read critically, the student must first understand the material accurately. The students are taught to recognize the structure and organization of the reading selections--the main ideas and how they are supported. When the students have identified the thesis or main idea and the support, they use interpretation skills to understand the author's ideas and logical evaluation to assess the soundness and relevance of these ideas. An internship program provides the reading center with tutors, who must have worked in the center for a semester for two hours of upper-division credit before they are hired. Since the reading and writing centers work together, functioning as support for the English department, tutors often work for both centers demonstrating for students the link between good reading and good writing. Though the reading center focuses primarily on the freshman English curriculum, its services are used by all levels of students and faculty across the university. The goal of both the reading center and the English department is to teach students to read with their minds--to think critically, accurately, and with depth of understanding. (SRT)

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A READING CENTER IN A UNIVERSITY ENGLISH DEPARTMENT

Joyce Hooker

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A READING CENTER IN A UNIVERSITY ENGLISH DEPARTMENT

The reading center at Brigham Young University functions as a support for the English Department. On the surface it may seem natural for a reading center to be associated with an English department. The reading skills needed to read essays critically, to interpret literature accurately and richly, and to read all material with good comprehension involve competence in the written language. This suggests that a reading center would serve as a support for an English department. Also, the obverse relationship of reading and writing suggests that a reading center should be closely allied with a writing center. However, BYU is singular in having a reading center that focuses primarily on critical reading as a part of the English program, and a center that is closely coordinated with a writing center. The primary aim of the center is to teach critical reading skills to typical university students, not just to work with students needing remedial or basic help. The secondary task of the reading center is to serve as a resource for teachers in all disciplines who want help in recognizing and evaluating good reading, or suggestions about improving the literacy skills necessary to the discipline they are teaching.

Since students entering BYU come from the top half of their graduating classes, most have been able to read well enough to have gotten through high school with few, if any, problems. However, when they come to the university, many are challenged by teachers and texts that expect critical appraisal of extensive

readings, rather than just the factual-comprehension-and-recall level of reading; too many students find that they do not know how to read beyond that level. Because students have probably had less than one percent of their reading-instruction time spent on learning how to read critically, the reading center fills a real need. Students who come to the center are taught principles of effective reading using their own materials; these materials serve as the medium for teaching effective reading principles, the reading center does not function to expedite specific assignments.

In order to read critically, the student must first understand the material accurately. To approach this, we teach the students to recognize the STRUCTURE and organization of the reading selections--the main ideas and how they are supported. When the students have clarified the thesis or main idea and the support, they use the two skills of INTERPRETATION to gain a deeper and richer understanding of the author's meaning, and LOGICAL EVALUATION to assess the soundness and relevance of the author's ideas.

We begin by teaching the students to identify the structure and then to make a map showing the structure and the relationship of the ideas. To do this effectively, the students preview the material. This improves both comprehension and retention. By noticing what is promised by titles, unusual emphases, repetitions, and editing devices, they collect clues to the content, purpose, and organization of the reading. They use

these clues to draw upon their own knowledge, experience, and ideas in order to anticipate the full development of the reading. Using this information they start a tentative map based upon what they believe will be developed in the reading selection. Careful previewing gives the students an organizational framework for pulling the ideas together, heightens their interest in the reading, and improves their reading rate. Following the preview, they read the selection carefully in order to make an accurate and complete map of the reading. This final mapping demands that the students sort out the essential ideas in the writing and indicate the relationships of the ideas both by grouping and by labeling the idea-group. This task improves their comprehension and retention.

In making maps, we pay attention to the author's purpose and mode of discourse, yet we are flexible in working with the formats that best represent the structure of the reading for individual students. We emphasize the importance of accuracy which includes being careful about the readers' not imposing their own values and biases onto the content. We require a complete sentence that states the main idea of the reading; this reflects the adequacy of the reader's comprehension. While we demand that maps show logical relationships of ideas, have adequate headings for grouping details, and contain a main idea statement, we allow for wide variety in the map patterns.

After the students are competent with typical mapping, we often add more sophisticated maps to their repertoire: three-col-

or maps to indicate levels of generality, and metaphorical maps. Mapping is a successful strategy that enhances the students' comprehension, retention, and recall.

The second area, interpretation, is used most extensively in analyzing literary works, but many of the skills also apply to nonfiction. Interpretation skills primarily involve familiarity with literary terms and their application to writings such as theme, conflict, plot, character, and a knowledge of literary elements such as the use of figurative language and symbols, allusion, point of view, style, and creation of tone, especially irony. It also requires a tolerance of and appreciation for ambiguity in meaning. The students become skilled in gathering the clues that lead to their drawing correct inferences, especially by noticing what is repeated, what is contrasted or compared, and how the language is used. Recognizing tone, understanding figurative language, and making correct inferences are often as important in non-fiction as they are in fiction.

In works of fiction, we analyze the contrasts, changes, and conflicts the author creates and the feelings these evoke. To the information above, we add clues to the author's view of what is ideal and what he sees in reality that falls short of this ideal. Identification of the gap between the ideal and reality helps point to the work's meaning or theme. Finally, we use all of the evidence collected to suggest a theme for the reading.

When reading both fiction and non-fiction critically, we have the students seek for clues to the author's world view, his

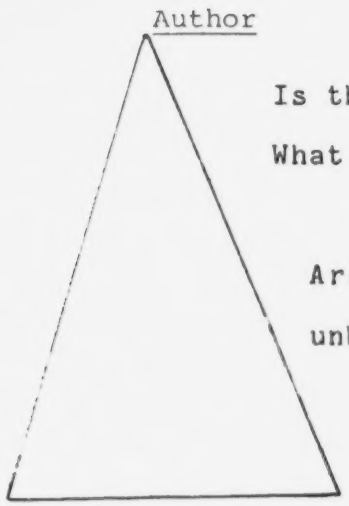
mental model of the world. The ideas the author has about God, the nature of the universe, man's nature and purpose, and the basis of morality have a great influence on all of his writing. Reading to gain glimpses of the author's world-view assumptions requires the reader to see behind what is said to try to discern why something is said. Discovering these ground-floor assumptions, the realities the author accepts as so obviously true that he usually does not state them, brings significant insight into and understanding of others' worlds and a depth of appreciation for the reading selection.

Logical evaluation is the third facet of critical reading that we teach the students. After teaching them the structural elements involved in a logical argument, we give them an argument to analyze, to evaluate logically, and to assess for its reasonableness. Logical evaluation requires the students to judge the merits of the ideas in the writing. They must recognize assumptions, detect fallacies, and weigh conclusions. In order to do all of this, we have the students approach the task in three steps. First, they determine the issue the argumentive essay is concerned and state the proposition or thesis of the argument. Second, they map the argument. A map of a complete argument includes 1) the proposition; 2) why the subject needs to be discussed; 3) a statement of the problem and concrete examples of it; 4) the solution to the problem, how to implement it, and why this solution should be accepted; 5) the counter-argument and its rebuttals; and 6) the conclusion. Once the structure of the

argument is clear and the evidence is laid out, the students do the third step. They evaluate the argument's soundness, relevance, and completeness. The simplest way we have found to do this third step is to use the format of the rhetorical stance and to ask the basic questions that each part of the triangle is concerned with.

Issue:

Thesis or proposition:


Author
Is the author credible?
What is his purpose?
Are the language and tone unbiased and objective?
Audience
Is the argument appropriate and acceptable?
Content
Is the evidence sufficient, reasonable? Is the argument convincing?

Answering these questions involves identification of the implicit assumptions suggested by the author's conclusions which uncovers fallacies, awareness of bias and tone, and the relevance and impact of the argument on the audience. The students are able to decide whether the evidence warrants acceptance of the position argued.

In addition to this assessment, the students evaluate the author's values, world view, the assumptions the argument is based upon, and the implications of the argument. To evaluate the implications of the argument, the students consider the effects the argument will have if implemented--what practical problems may arise? Would the effects of the argument be acceptable in the long run? The assumptions and implications must be sound in order for the argument to be acceptable. Finally, they assess all of their information to decide if the whole argument warrants their acceptance. Analyzing the logic of a work requires the reader to use his own knowledge, experience, and sense as well as to be sensitive to the author's honesty and fairness.

Reading to evaluate selections logically helps the students develop critical thinking abilities in all three critical reading areas--structure, interpretation, and logic. A thorough evaluation requires them to be as objective in their reading as possible. They must set aside their own biases and prejudices at least temporarily.

In both fiction and non-fiction readings, we help make the student aware of the value of knowing the author's biographical context, the literary genre, the concerns of the particular historical period when the writing was done, the ideological context of the writing, and of their own reading context. Thus the students more fully understand and appreciate the piece of writing. In order to gather all of the elements that comprise a

good writing, the students must read the work more than once. They begin to see what gives the writing unity and what makes it a work of art as they read and re-read for different levels of comprehension.

Our approach to critical reading is similar to that of an archeologist examining an ancient piece of pottery: he wants to know 1) its shape, and what holds it together--the structure, 2) its significance or meaning--interpretation, and 3) whether it would hold water or not--logic. These reveal something of the mind, values and life of the potter who created it. Careful reading can bring the same type of rewards to the reader.

The students who use the center generally learn quickly and respond well to the critical reading skills that they had previously groped for. They usually bring in their own reading materials which we use to teach the critical reading skills that they need in order to be efficient and accurate in their reading. We frequently augment their materials with some of our own in order to teach the principles of critical reading that seem especially difficult for them. We tailor the critical reading work to the students' needs rather than have them work through programmed materials that may be partly redundant for them.

Since it takes some time for our tutors to know all that is avialable in the center, we have an internship program that requires prospective tutors to work in the center for a semester for two hours' upper-division credit before being hired as a

tutor. Interns spend one hundred hours on center work; this includes time spent in weekly meetings and in writing required reports.

The interns use a handbook that defines and explains the skills, gives them priorities for the work they need to do, explains concepts, and provides practice materials (the practice materials are useful in tutoring students also). By the middle of their first semester, most interns feel confident enough to start working with students who drop in to the center or to offer mini-classes in critical reading skills. The mini-classes are arranged for by the English department; the topics discussed in the mini-classes correspond with the freshman English syllabus and augment the classes. The readings used include essays, poetry, novels, and non-fiction books. Students who attend the miniclasses may be assigned to do so by their teachers or they come out of their own interest.

In their training meetings, the interns are given assignments, they report on the work they have done, and they discuss any questions or ideas they have about the work. As they gain confidence in various skills, they design lessons and teach each other before they venture out to teach mini-classes to the freshmen.

A typical semester's agendum for the intern meetings is:

1. Introduction to the center, its purposes, procedures and programs
2. Previewing and mapping skills

3. Advanced mapping--metaphorical and three-color maps
4. Interpretation skills--symbols, allusions, imagery, point of view, organization, etc.
5. Connotative and figurative language, diction, and style
6. Drawing correct inferences (clues from connotation, conversations, description, imagery, action)
7. Determining tone
8. Arriving at the theme in literature
9. Discovering the author's world view
10. Argument structure
11. Reasoning (inductive, deductive, syllogisms, implicit assumptions, fallacies)
12. Analyzing an argument and evaluating it
13. Speed reading/comprehension

This agendum is fuller than the time we have to spend on it, so those items not taught during the internship semester are presented in the meetings with the tutors in succeeding semesters. In the tutor meetings, the experienced tutors often teach the concepts, and present the lesson with their own innovations.

Most of the students who work as tutors are English majors, but there are others from various curricula who provide a balance of interest and perspective. The tutors are generally academically gifted as well as personable, skilled, cooperative, and usually diligent. Even with all the work that is required of them, we have more students who complete their internships than we have hours available to hire them.

An advantage we have in being associated with a university is that occasionally a graduate student is assigned to work in the reading center. We have benefited from this in having materials--especially in logic--developed, refined, and coordinated within the English department, with the Philosophy and other departments. Some other materials, particulary reference modules in each of the three critical reading skills, were created in part with the help of graduate students.

The reading and writing centers work closely together--they are in connecting rooms and have the same director and secretary. Because most tutors work in both centers, they are able to show the students coming in for help in either center the strong link between good reading and good writing.

The center teaches critical reading skills that can make the student an independent, thoughtful, and accurate reader. It offers students throughout the university, but particularly in freshman English classes, the opportunity to learn and practice skills that will see them through their academic work and into their careers with greater success. The ability to read critically benefits students through the increased success and pleasure they get from both their required and recreational reading.

The reading center at BYU supports the English department by teacing reading-thinking skills at the university level. While the center's program focuses primarily on the freshman

English curriculum, its services are used by all levels of students and faculty across the university. The ability to read critically is a skill that university students can learn and use to great advantage. The goal of both the reading center and the English department is for students to read with their minds--to think critically, accurately, and with depth of understanding.